

## THEATRE REVIEW

# Romeo and Juliet is a hip take on the Bard's classic

## Classical Theatre of Harlem performs at the Florida Rep

BY NANCY STETSON  
Florida Weekly Correspondent

Language may have changed drastically since Shakespeare's time, but human emotions and human situations (falling in love for the first time, rebelling against one's parents) remain universally timeless.

The Florida Repertory Theatre begins its triumphant tenth season this month by presenting a "Romeo and Juliet" for our time, a production by the Classical Theatre of Harlem. It's the inaugural play of the Chico's World Classic Initiative, whose goal is to present a classic every year and perform it free of charge for 5,000 high school students.

Florida Rep's producing artistic director Robert Cacioppo could've done no better than choosing this production. It's full of attitude and audacity, celebrating love with great insight and tenderness. And it's hip enough to appeal to today's generation.

Director Alfred Preisser's set this late 16th-century play in Harlem of the near future, giving the characters hip-hop clothes and dance moves. And the Capulets and Montagues fight with guns and knives, not swords, so it has more of an East Coast-West Coast rivals-to-the-end gangsta feel.

The 21st century locale and dress isn't a gimmick, just a way of seeing a familiar play with new eyes. Preisser has kept Shakespeare's original language and clever word play, though sometimes, unfortunately, some

of the actors' diction isn't clear. (On opening night, some mumbled-mouthed lines, rushing through them.)

But, for the most part, this troupe imbues the Elizabethan lines with freshness. (And setting it in modern times also makes some of Shakespeare's lines sound like modern lingo, with lines such as, "Here comes my man.")

Romeo and Juliet's iconic balcony scene is especially outstanding, with Robin LeMon (Juliet) delivering the well-known lines as if she were making them up on the spot, speaking from her heart. LeMon is totally believable as a not-quite-14-year-old girl falling in love for the first time. And that's saying a lot; innocence and purity are much more difficult qualities for actors to portray realistically.

Romeo is a Romeo worthy of her. Duane Allen is winsome in the role, charming the audience as well as young Juliet. And this is no wimpy, wispy guy; this Romeo is buff.

The two positively glow as they meet and instantly fall in love. Their scenes together are so wonderfully intimate you're compelled to watch even while you simultaneously wonder if you should turn away to give them some privacy.

Juliet's father (James Singletary) is emotionally and physically abusive towards his daughter. And though her mother (Libya Pugh) comes across as a strong woman of conviction, she is too cowed to stand up to him as he rages and bullies their daugh-

ter. Andrea Cosley plays the Nurse without guile, and is more of a friend to Juliet than her parents.

Keith Jamal Downing, as Juliet's cousin, Tybalt, and Tracy Jack as Romeo's cousin, Benvolio are outstanding in their supportive roles. Jack especially has an easy way about her on-stage. And Daniel Morgan Shelley as the skull-wearing Mercutio, both narrates and takes part in this tragedy.

Troy Scarborough as Friar Laurence adds comic relief to all the fighting and plotting, a bewildered man trying to do the right thing. He's first asked to marry the offspring of two feuding families, then soon after asked to marry Juliet (again) to someone else. His comic timing and expression garners many of the evening's laughs.

Troy Hourie's set design is basic — scaffolding and shiny streamers. The scaffolding's multi-functional, moved around throughout the play to suggest different settings — a balcony and fire escape, a chapel. But the colorful streamers are distracting and don't seem to fit the play's tone; cloth or canvas would've worked better.

As in Shakespeare's time, the play includes bawdy joking and sexual gestures. There are also visual gags, such as a UPS delivery man with a Fed Ex letter. (Which possibly explains why the Friar's important letter to Romeo didn't get delivered.)

Purists will be horrified by this production. Not only is it set in modern times with a hip-hop attitude, but it's abridged, con-

densed to 90 minutes, no intermission. But it should be just the thing for teens (for whom "Romeo and Juliet" is required reading in high school), jarring them into realizing that Shakespeare — and theater — is relevant to their lives. And fun.

As for the rest of Florida Rep's audiences, it'll be interesting to see how they respond. In the best of all worlds, Florida Rep's audience will expand and diversify. But in an area that prides itself on gated communities, and in a city that may not be as diverse as most, a multi-racial, multi-cultural theatre troupe from Harlem might be a hard sell.

Over the years, Florida Rep's presented theater that is high quality and challenging. In bringing the Classical Theatre of Harlem here, Cacioppo's given us a great gift. Here's hoping Southwest Florida's smart enough to recognize that. ■

### If you go

>>What: Chico's World Classic Initiative presents "Romeo and Juliet," A Classical Theatre of Harlem Production

>>When: Through Oct. 6, 8 p.m. on Fridays and 2 and 8 p.m. on Saturdays

>>Where: Florida Repertory Theatre at the Arcade Theatre on Bay Street between Hendry and Jackson in downtown Fort Myers

>>Cost: \$34 - \$38, \$17 for selected seats.

>>Info: Call 332-4488



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